EDGAR SALTUS Reviews the Poems and Tales of an Erotic Genius Whose Writings Are a Modern "Decameron."

—A NEW BOCCACCIO.—

It is a circumstance at once curious and significant that Boccaccio has been famous for centuries, not because of his erudition, which was encyclopedic; not because of his treatises, which were unique; nor yet because of his resuscitation of Homer, but simply and solely because of a handful of erotticisms which he composed to pleasure the idlesse of a little Neapolitan princess, with whose dimples and depravity he was in love.

Books have their destinies. There are stupidities that survive for no other reason that that death has ignored them. There are masterpieces that live because they are immortal. The "Decameron" is one of them. Moliere pillaged it. It was sacked by La Fontaine. For hundreds of years its vogue was great. Gradually it disapeared. It is back-book-shelved; read, if at all, but by schoolboys and inquisitive girls.

But no one thing ever really disappears. There is a process of convolution in which, temporarily, it may be lost to sight, but from which presently it emerges transformed. With the subsidence of Boccaccio the appearance of a new star was but a matter of astronomico-literary computation.

And, precisely as in space, a star will arise, the light of which takes years to reach us, so, in Europe, there appeared some time ago an author of whose existence we have apparently just learned. His name is Gabriel d'Annunzio, and if you make his acquaintance you will recognize in him Boccaccio redivius, Boccaccio revamped, rubbed down, sponged off and up to date.

1376---BOCCACCIO---GABRIEL D'ANNUNZIO---1896.

"There is a pretty woman," some one said to Balzac. "You mean," Balzac answered, "there is a book." And, as a matter of fact, to write novels nowadays you must live them, dig them from the feminine heart. The little, lascivious tales of Boccaccio were all very well in their time, for their time was lascive. They were actualities, typical of an epoch that has gone. This end of the century of ours is smitten with elegantiasis. Primeval Adam and primitive Eve circulate as before, but fashion has decreed not alone that they shall be decently attired, but that they shall be elaborately garbed. The adventures of Cupid are identical. He used to be naked and unashamed. In the Middle Ages he got a coating of dirt. To-day he is just the same vicious little chap as before, but his wardrobe is complete. His trousers come from Bond street, his shirts from the Rue de la Paix. He never utters a word that could not be shrieked through a ballroom. C'est un petit monsieur a la mode. Were he otherwise he would be shown the door. All of which d'Annunzio has thoroughly appreciated, and in digging his stories from the hearts of his mistresses he has presented them in a fashion entirely correct.

But just here a distinction is necessary. Italian life differs from ours. In the upper circles you will always find virtue, as we spell it, in the dictionary, sometimes in the convent, rarely anywhere else. It is the absence of a quality which we regard as an added grace that fills d'Annunzio's pages. The episodes which he relates would cause Mr. Comstock a great amount of suffering; the more so, perhaps, because he could not interfere with them. There is no grossness of language; none of Boccaccio's luxurious details.

Passion is plentiful, but as it has been drawn, not from the imagination, but from life, its lack of allurement is psychological and exact. As pages turn and faces emerge, which, if they do not reek with blood, will drip with tears, always you catch the echo of a refrain, "Sono l'Amore, difida di me." Melancholy sits brooding through them all. They don't make you much in love with love.

D'Annunzio wrote in verse before he discovered that prose is more difficult. But the verse is excellent. At that period his inkstand must have been an aviary filled with songbirds that trilled to him lays of modern Rome. He listened, put them on paper, made them quite heady, pagan in sentiment as in beauty, and, after their publication, as he happened to be young, good looking and received, found himself, like Byron, in a position to toss monogrammed handkerchiefs where he chose. That is what fame means to young poets. Sometimes to old ones, too.

It was then that the experiments in anima vili, or, to put it more courteously, in the feminine heart, began. They resulted in three masterpieces and international applause. He has been given the freedom of Europe. By lovers of good prose he is feted. But in that vast public which extends from the Caucasus to the Andes popularity has not annoyed him yet.

The reason is two-fold. In six weeks any one can speak Italian badly. To speak it in its perfection—to even appreciate a fractional part of its infinite shadings—is another guitar. As a consequence, Italian fiction is not used for expert purposes. In addition the commercial value of any translation is slight. However faithful the rendition may be, always it is like a pressed flower—the charm has gone. The result has been that the rubric on the title page, "Translated from the Italian," has frightened all but the inquisitive and those not frightened already by d'Annunzio's repute.

Publishers will, if you let them, tell you that the public want books that end well. D'Annunzio's don't. Publishers have also decided that the public require of novels to be bright, gay and alert. D'Annunzio's are none of these things. In giving his literary ancestry he claims Dostoievsky and Tolstoi as progenitors.

Both are gloomy enough, but he conceals Schopenhauer, and the latter has dripped his pessimism on every page.

The influences of all three are particularly manifest in "L'Innocente," a story at once extremely simple and extremely complex, one in which two people love and torture each other so realistically that the reader agonizes with them. To accomplish that is to approach very closely to the perfection of art.

It opens with the reflections of Tullio. He recalls how "submissive and repentant" he returned to Juliane, his wife, "after his first serious infidelity;" how indulgent she was, despite, as he puts it, "the melancholy of her smile."

"But, in three years, how much had occurred! Between Juliane and myself the breach had become final, irreparable. I had done nothing but hurt her. I had offended her in the most outrageous manner. I had been without regard for her. I had given myself up to self-indulgence, to the satisfaction of passion and the wilfulness of my corrupted mind. I had taken two of her intimate friends for mistresses. For several weeks I had lived openly in Florence with Therese Raffo. With the false Count Raffo I had a duel, in which as a result of certain bizarre circumstances he covered himself with ridicule. Of all these things Juliane had been aware. She had suffered, too, because of them, but with a great deal of pride and without saying hardly a word. Our conversations on the subject had been infrequent and brief. During them not once did I lie. It seemed to me that in the eyes of that sweet and noble woman whom I knew to be highly intellectual, honesty might attenuate my sins."

There is a paragraph which is pure Dostoievsky.

"There had been an hour in which we both dreamed not of love alone, but of a passion which should continue unto death—usque ad mortem. We both believed in that dream, and in each other's arms more than once those grand illusory words, Forever! Never! were uttered by us both. We believed in the affinity of our flesh, in that rare and mysterious affinity which joins two people in the terrible bonds of insatiate desire. We believed in it because that desire had not diminished, even when, by the creation of another being, the obscure genius of the species had achieved through us his aim."

There is a paragraph with Schopenhauer written all over it. The influence of Tolsto is in the core of the novel itself.

Tullio conceives that it will be pleasant to have his wife for a sister, subsequently falls in love with her again, permits her to see that he is, and, at the very moment when she is about to put her hand in his, tells her in so many words that he is about to join that Therese. She is speaking of the morrow, he interrupts her:

"'To-morrow I shan't be here.'

"So strange was my voice that she started. I added at once: 'I am going away.'

"Then, with that feeling a man must have who is obliged to strike a second blow to kill his victim, I continued hurriedly: 'I am going to Florence.'

"'Ah.'

"Abruptly she understood. With one rapid gesture she turned, twisted herself on the cushions to look in my face, and in that tragic attitude I could see the white of her eyes.

"'Juliane,' I stammered, and leaned toward her, fearful lest she might faint.

"But she lowered her lashes, turned again, drew away, crouched as though she were cold, and so for several minutes remained, the eyes closed, the mouth contracted, motionless. The pulsations of an artery, visible in the neck, and a few convulsive movements of the hands, alone indicated that she was alive.

"Was not that a crime? Yes, it was the first of my crimes, and not the least, either."

He returns after months and falls again in love with his wife. Meanwhile she has been strangely silent, strangely sad. One day they are in the garden. He kneels to her.

"'The first time I left you I thought everything was at an end between us. I was in search of another love, a fresher passion, a higher fever. I wanted to envelop life in a single embrace. You were insufficient for me. And for years I wearied myself in a labor so atrocious that I loathe it now, just as a felon must loathe the prison in which he lived while dying a little every day. I had to wander from one darkness to another before the light broke on my soul, before truth appeared. Juliane, I have loved but one woman, and that is you. You alone are sympathy and sweetness; you are the best and loveliest creature in the world. You are the Unique. And you were in my house while I was seeking you afar. Do you understand now? Do you understand? You were in my house while I was seeking you afar. Tell me, does not that compensate for your tears? Wouldn't you have shed more, still more, to have acquired that certainty?'

"'Yes, still more,' she answered, but in a voice so low I hardly heard it.

"It was but a breath on her lips. From between her half-closed lashes tears came, streaking her face, wetting her mouth, falling on her heaving breast.

"'Oh, let me drink.'

"On her eyes I pressed my lips. I bathed them with those tears. My arm was about her. I was kissing her again and again. I drew her closer, closer yet.

"'Did you dream of being so beloved?' In my mouth the salt savor was inundating my heart. Later, in the hours that followed, I was dumbfounded that the savor of those tears had not been intolerably bitter. 'Did you imagine such happiness? To me, too, it is so strange. If I could only tell you. It isn't to-day that I know you and love you. It is to-day I have found you—a moment ago when you said "Yes, still more." For that is what you said, didn't you? Just three words—a breath. And I am being born again, and you are being born again, and we shall be happy, happy forever.'

"I said these things to her, others, too, in that voice of which the intonations seem to mount not from the material organs of speech, but from the uttermost depths of the soul. And she, who up to this point had been crying silently, burst into sobs, into sobs that were violent, sobs such as are produced not by an overwhelming joy, but by some inconsolable despair. She sobbed so violently that at the moment I was startled. Unconsciously I drew back a bit. Her head was lowered, against her mouth she was pressing a handkerchief. But the sobs continued, and with each sob her whole body shook. I was before her, on my knees, not touching her, but watching her, startled still and yet curiously alert, attentive to what was about to occur within me and to the surroundings as well. I heard her sobs, I heard the warbling of birds. I had perceptions of time and of place that were exact. And the flowers, the perfumes of the garden, the motionless splendor of the atmosphere, the gaiety which Spring had spread, created with me a terror that increased and increased until it expanded into a form of panic, that blind and instinctive fright against which reason is impotent. Then, just as the thunder explodes, a thought, leaping from that fear, illuminated me and stabbed me to the heart. She is impure!' "

In the story the antecedent details and anecdotes render the scene very poignant. If you don't suffer with Tullio, it may occur that you will weep for Juliane. The child which is subsequently born to her he kills. Meanwhile, he forgives her. That is Tolstoism, a theory which, if good in art, is bad in practice. It is the irreproachable alone who have the power to forgive. A pure woman who forgives a faithless husband is admirable, but the forgiveness of a faithless husband to a faithless wife is complaisance when it does not happen to be complicity. At the same time, as a publisher might say, that is what the public want, in which case here they have it.

It was with this book that D'Annunzio made his reputation. Previously he had produced a novel entitled "Il Piacere," and subsequently he issued a third, the "Trionfo della Morte."

The latter, while admirable as a study of sensuality, lacks the vehemence and nervousness of "L'Innocente;" it lacks, too, the dramatic element. The reader is outwearied before the tale is done, and when the hero finally kills himself you regret that he took so long about it.

The story opens on the second anniversary of the loves of George Aurispa and Hippolyte, a lady separated from her husband. He tells her that she is beginning to cease to care, but very magnanimously, without reproaches, after the gentlemanly fashion which Schopenhauer put in vogue.

"'Notice,' he says, 'that I don't complain. I know it is not your fault. We all have within us a certain quantity of love to expend. It is inevitable with time, which consumes everything, that quantity itself should be consumed. When it is, love ends. No effort can prevent it. You have loved me now for a long while—almost two years!'

"'Do you think I don't love you any more?' she asks. 'I think you do,' he replies. 'Indeed, I do. But can you show me that to-morrow, next month, in a year, you will love me still? Can you show me that now, at this very moment, you are wholly mine. What have I got of you?'

"'Everything.'

"'Nothing, or almost nothing. You are a stranger to me. Like every one else, there is within you a world which I cannot enter, which no love of mine, however ardent, can open. Your sensations, your sentiments, your ideas, I know little of. Speech is imperfect. The soul is incommunicable, and yours you cannot give to me. Even in each other's arms we are disunited, always disunited, separate, strangers, lonely of heart: I kiss your brow, and behind it how do I know but that there is a thought which is not for me? I speak to you, and it may be that my words awake in you other memories than that of our affection. A man passes, he looks at you, and that act engenders within you an emotion which I am unable to discover. I say to you, "What are you thinking of?" You answer, "What are you thinking of?" I don't know what you think, you don't know what I think. Each minute we are further apart. The gulf between us assumes the proportions of an abyss.'

"Hippolyte interrupts him.

"'I don't feel that way at all. It may be that I love more'—

"Then, after a moment of silence, seduced by a phrase and the desire to utter it, she adds:

"'It is only the dead that are dissected.' "

In the course of chapters it occurs to George that if Hippolyte is not to him what he expects, it is because of Rome, because of the world, because they are not alone, a universe to themselves. He takes her to the country.

"Thereafter for many days there was new ecstasy. Invaded, both of them, by a fever quasi delirious, they did nothing, forgot everything, lost themselves in each other's arms. Nights outlasted the dawn. They fasted without suffering, without perceiving it, precisely as though they were sublimated, dispossessed of vulgar needs. It seemed to them that their passion mounted chimerically beyond the confines of the real. The palpitation of their hearts seemed to acquire a power that was prodigious. Sometimes it seemed to them that once more they had found that moment of supreme oblivion, that moment unique which had visited them when their lips first met. It seemed to them that they had recovered again that confused and indefinable sensation of being dispersed like vapor through the air. Sometimes it seemed to them that the spot which they had chosen was indefinitely distant from other places, far away, isolated, inaccessible, outside of the world.

"A mysterious power drew them together, joined them, mixed them, melted them one in the other, similarized them in flesh and spirit, united them into one. A mysterious power separated them, disjoined them, pushed them apart, dug an abyss between them, planted in the core of their being a feeling of mortal despair.

"In these alternatives both found delight and suffering. They reascended to the primal ecstacy of their love and redescended to the extreme effort to repossess each other. They renscended again, remounted to the origin of earthly illusion, inhaled the mystic shadow where for the first time, and tremblingly, they uttered the same dumb vow; and they redescended again, redescended to the torture of hope deferred, entered into an atmosphere of fog thick and suffocating, an atmosphere charged with whirlwinds of cinders and sparks."

A little more, a little less, a little less analysis, a little more gayety, less intensity and more interest, and could you not fancy that you were reading Boccaccio?

Besides, pictures of that character are disconcerting. They tell of fire and flames beside which native drawings suggest but extinguished volcanoes. It would seem that not alone does virtue in Italy differ from ours, but love as well. In any event, the truffles and red pepper which D'Annunzio serves puts in the mouth a taste with which the tea and toast of our local novelists have left us hitherto unacquainted.

Truffles and red pepper are repeated in Il Piacere, the third novel on which the reputation of D'Annunzio may be said to rest. The scene is Rome, and there is a constant procession of Rome's elect. Several of the characters are taken from real life, and many of the incidents actually occurred. One, for instance, is of European notoriety—the detection there of a foreign envoy cheating at cards. The characters and incidents provide, in consequence, that savor of actuality which Bourget always obtains and which the other novels of D'Annunzio lack. The hero, Andre Sperelli, is Tullio, he is George Aurispa, he is Gabriel D'Annunzio in impropria persona.

The story opens at a dinner. Andre is there and meets, for the first time, Helene, Duchess of Scerni. The moment she appears he recognizes in her his ideal.

"She shall be mine," he tells himself. "She will clasp me in her arms, on her heart."

At table he is seated next to her and he fancies himself leaning over and pressing his lips on her neck; he fancies, too, that her skin must be quite cold; he sees that it is diaphanous, and mentally he compares it to a very subtle milk traversed by a golden light.

"You must be made like Corregio's Danae," he tells her. But she is not offended. She accepts the implied desire as a compliment.

"Her voice was so insinuating that it conveyed almost the sensation of a kiss. She had intonations, as she had glances, which exhaled a charm entirely aphrodisiac. She dispensed over readily the visual delights of her graces. At times, before every one, she would display a gesture, a posture, or an expression which in an alcove would have made a lover quiver. Whoso looked at her could obtain at least a spark of pleasure, divine the secret of her embraces, caress her in thought. She appeared to have been created only for love, and the air she breathed was ever inflamed by the desires she excited about her."

This lady, who is a widow, becomes Andre's mistress. But she is not rich; an English lord offers himself. She takes him, leaves Andre, leaves Rome. He consoles himself, or attempts to, with one of those women who spiritualize everything they approach. She resembled the duchess as a cool fjord in Norway resembles a jungle in Hindostan. She worships him. He manages to break her heart and leaves her.

Tales of Loves and Passionate Adventure Which Rank with the Classic of Five Hundred Years Ago.

For true it is, and has been, and will be, that to love and to be loved are matters totally separate and absolutely distinct.

It is idle to note that in these novels there is no attempt at moralizing. And yet in them, as in others of a similar character, a moral there is—one which all thinkers admit, to wit, that the gratification of the senses is but an unconscious flight toward the ideal; that the most passionate excesses are engendered by a desire for the impossible, by aspirations for that felicity which is superterrestrial and divine.

It is this, consciously or otherwise, which D'Annunzio has had in mind, as his predecessor had it before him. But where the one sighs at the failure, the other smiled. D'Annunzio is a new Boccaccio, but a Boccaccio in black.

EDGAR SALTUS.

BULLETS OF PURE GOLD.

These California Trappers Melted Down the Yellow Metal Thinking It Was "Brass."

Prospectors and miners in Southern California are talking about a remarkable "lost" gold mine, and an expedition is soon to start in search of it. It is called the "Peg-Leg Smith" mine.

Smith, after whom it was named, was a California trapper before the discovery of gold in that State. In the Fall of 1835 he joined a party to hunt on the banks of the Gila River, where fur animals were reported to be very plentiful.

Shortly after their arrival Smith had the misfortune to suffer a compound fracture of one of his legs, the bone being crushed in such a manner by a huge mass of rock as to render ineffective the crude knowledge of surgery possessed by his comrades. He is accredited with amputating his limb with an old saw and of searing the bleeding stump with a red-hot ramrod. Incredible as it seems, there are men who say it is a fact.

They trapped up the east bank of the Gila River for some distance before they crossed, but how far up is, unfortunately, not known. The location of their ford would be a key to the lost wealth. After crossing the river they continued on westward for the purpose of exploring the then unknown desert.

The second night after crossing their pack animals strayed away from camp, and their half-breed herder, who had brought with them from Santa Fe, took their trail. He returned late in the afternoon with the animals, and his pockets full of a dull, yellowish metal.

He reported having found the animals several miles to the southwest, feeding around the base of some small hills. One of these he climbed to take observations as to the location of the camp, and found a quantity of the metal along the sides and on the summit.

Gold, it must be remembered, had not yet been discovered in the West, and placer gold was an unknown metal. After trying it with fire and their knives, the trappers, being illiterate, pronounced it brass, not knowing that that metal was a composite.

They tried it in their moulds, and found that it made excellent bullets. As their stock of lead was running low, they decided to send a detail to the hills the next day to lay in a supply.

This was done, and according to Peg-leg, who accompanied the detail, "three little dark red hills were literally covered with the metal, some of the chunks being so large that one man could hardly lift them." In a short time the detail had picked up all the metal they could conveniently carry without any apparent diminution in the supply.

The detail returned to camp, and the next day was employed in making a large supply of bullets, as there was an abundance of Indian signs, and the redskins gave evidence of becoming troublesome. The day following the party took up its line of march along a well-defined Indian trail, their experience teaching them that it would pass by some water hole farther on.

They had hardly got well under way when they were attacked by Indians, and a running fight ensued for the entire day. But as few of the Indians were armed with old rifles, the majority having lances, bows and arrows and clubs, the trappers had little difficulty in keeping them off.

While passing a high clay butte along the trail a bullet whizzed by Peg-leg's head and buried itself in the sun-baked clay. From curiosity Peg-leg dug it out with the point of his knife, and found that it was yellow metal, similar to those the white men were shooting.

After Marshall's discovery of gold, Peg-leg compared that find with the "yellow metal" in his possession, and then realized that the supposed "brass" was virgin gold, and they had been shooting it at Indians. At the time of the discovery of gold in California Peg-leg was a confirmed drunkard, and was well along in years.

He sold his "brass" nuggets and soon swallowed the proceeds, and then made several ineffectual attempts to return alone to the three "little dark red hills." Later he had no difficulty in organizing expeditions among his acquaintances who had seen his gold and heard his story, but he could never return to the spot. The last time he fetched up at the river, and, giving up the search he returned with his disgusted expedition to Los Angeles, and some time after is reported to have died in a hospital in San Francisco.

No doubt of the truth of his story is entertained by old California miners. Those who are now preparing to search for this lost mine say that the fording place of the trappers on the Colorado would be a probable key to the lost mines. It is generally known that there are buried, living waters between the the scene of the last fight with the Indians, within the number of days. These waters are those in Carrizo, the old Government trail of Dos Palmas, on the route. Two days may have been the number of steps and [illegible] estimated, for [illegible] called lengthens when one [illegible] Indians day and [illegible] taking things into consideration, a search for the lost wealth entails the perilous hardships of prospecting over 15,000 square miles of hot, dry desert and mountains.